

The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



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THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Although neither the origin nor history of the expression ["May you live in interesting times"](#) is certain, most literate folk agree that whether it be of ancient Chinese or modern British pedigree, it is unquestionably a curse, not a blessing. Almost always used ironically, "May you live in interesting times" carries the clear implication that 'uninteresting times' - of peace and tranquility - are more life-enhancing than interesting ones. Those of us who agree with the ironic nature of



the statement, will no doubt also agree that we are, without a doubt, living in incredibly "interesting times." Need proof? Look no further than the stultifying political logjam permeating the House Republican caucus.

Who in the name of Henry Clay is going to be the next Speaker? Is there anyone out there whose appeal - not to mention

political standing - can bridge the caucus's various case-hardened factions and ideological divides? And most importantly perhaps, who in their right mind would even want to grab hold of that toxic gavel? Is there any reason to believe that the next Speaker - whoever he or she may be - stands a snowball's chance of accomplishing that which John Boehner could not: herding the cats currently making up the Republican caucus? As Pennsylvania Representative Charlie Dent - a longtime member of the moderate [Main Street Partnership](#) - put it: *The same guys who fragged Boehner will go after the new guy . . .*"

Indeed, these *are* most interesting times.

As I write this piece, various names are being bandied about. None is more prominently mentioned than that of Wisconsin Representative (and House Ways and Means Chair) Paul Ryan. As much as there can be a consensus candidate, Ryan would appear to be the guy. In the past 48 hours Ryan has gone, in the words of California Republican Darrell Issa " . . . from a 'hard no' to he knows he has to consider it." When asked yesterday on his way to the airport whether or not he would run, Ryan responded, *"Right now I'm going to make my flight so I can make it home for dinner. Sorry guys I'm just going to go. The Packers are at home. They're going to beat the Rams and cover the spread."*

[Various names](#) have been bandied about:

- Florida's arch-conservative **Daniel Webster** who as of a recent court decision doesn't even know if he will have a district in which to run for reelection.
- Utah's **Jason Chaffetz**, who few believe could unite the caucus.
- Louisiana's **Steve Scalise**, the Majority Whip. In the current political climate, occupying the number three rung on the House leadership ladder could actually work against him. In his favor: he is a favorite target of the White House press secretary Josh Earnest, who refers to him as "David Duke without the baggage"
- Then there are calls for electing some kind of "interim speaker," although exactly what that means is not clear.

The current situation certainly does not bode well for Republicans heading into the 2016 election. Neither does it bode well for the remainder of the 114th Congress, which should be taking up such critical issues as raising the nation's debt ceiling, repairing the country's infrastructure and deciding issues of war and peace. As things now stand, instead of dealing with issues of consequence, the remainder of the 114th Congress will consist of more hearings on Benghazi and Planned Parenthood, additional votes on repealing Obamacare and throwing lots red meat to the party's base via such "issues" as the administration's war on Christianity and plans to take everyone's guns away.

If one is a Democrat, the knee-jerk reaction is, of course, to smile and smirk. "Let 'em show how incapable they are of getting anything done," we say. "The current imbroglio will send 'em into the political wilderness for at least a generation." Maybe yes, maybe no. What is far more important than partisan smiling or smirking, it seems to me, is what's going to happen to the country; of our ability to get anything done. Remember, in order to deal with the nation's economy, our trade and foreign policy or the future of the middle class, the president - any president - needs someone to negotiate with. And it cannot be the Democrats alone; that's not how Democracy works. The essence of political

progress is compromise; of getting not what the majority wants or demands so much as achieving that which a majority can live with. Governance requires a majority that will to put the nation's needs ahead of a party's hide-bound ideology; of being motivated by far, far more than the next election.

To say the least, it is a tall order. And to have any hope of achieving that tall order in these overwhelmingly "interesting times," it seems to me, will take thinking outside the box; to contemplate "going where no one has ever gone before."

What in the Hell am I suggesting?

That despite being in the minority, Democrats help Republicans select someone both parties can live with in the short-run, in exchange for a promise that for the remainder of this Congress, they will knuckle down and work only on issues of national importance. That is, to put all those grandstanding investigative hearings on the back burner, roll up their sleeves, and show the country that Congress cares more about addressing the problems of this world than about bringing on a millennial Apocalypse. In this instance, thinking outside the box demands that the new Speaker be one who isn't just acceptable to the Republicans, but rather *one who can be acceptable to both parties*.

I further recommend that a cadre of Democrats and establishment Republicans form a majority and go outside of Congress to select their next Speaker. Remember, the Constitution does not require that the Speaker be an elected member of the House. Ideally, this person would be a former member of the House - one who knows, understands, and appreciates how the institution can work. It goes without saying that this person should be someone who, no longer being engaged in seeking reelection, is capable of putting the nation's needs ahead of partisan political considerations.

After giving the matter a lot of thought, I've come up with someone I firmly believe is born for the position: Former Oklahoma Representative [Mickey Edwards](#).



(A caveat: I know Mickey, have written about him extensively over the years, am dazzled by his understanding of Congress, and am truly fond of him.) Mickey was a Republican member of the House from 1977 to 1993, was one of the three founding trustees of the

Heritage Foundation and served as national chair of the National Conservative Union. Mickey was also a member of the House Republican leadership, serving as the chairman of the House Republican Policy Committee, the party's fourth-ranking leadership position. Since leaving Congress more than 20 years ago, Mickey has carved out a major academic career. For 11 years, he was the John Quincy Adams Lecturer in Legislative Practice at Harvard's Kennedy School. He then spent five years as a lecturer at Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. He is currently Vice President of the Aspen Institute and Director of the Aspen Institute-Rodel Fellowships in Public Leadership. He has also authored numerous books and articles. My personal favorite is his 2012 work [*The Parties Vs. the People: How to Turn Republicans and Democrats into Americans*](#), published by Yale University Press.

I firmly believe that Mickey has the skill, the intelligence, the personality and political chops to ford the lethal stream our Congress has become. He is a political pro for whom patriotism, is, in the words of the late Adlai Stevenson " . . . *not a short and frenzied outburst of emotion, but the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime.*" Mickey Edwards is one of the best, most significant political minds of the past half-century. He walks the walk and talks the talk.

If we are to survive these "interesting times," it will require thinking outside the box. I truly believe there are enough Democrats and Republicans who care more about addressing issues of importance than serving the needs of their benefactors. I also believe that political logjams of historic dimension require solutions of historic proportion.

Mickey Edwards for Speaker!

How's that for thinking outside the box?

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